

# How Adults Learn

Teaching adults is not the same as teaching children. Adults have very different needs and interests from those of children. This will affect the methods, materials, and attitudes of the teacher in important ways. Here are some important tenets of adult learning to remember when teaching adults.

## **Adults are still growing and developing.**

An adult learner may also be all of the following: son, husband, father, worker, Spanish speaker, English speaker, church choir member, soccer player, and union member. Adults are always learning in order to cope with the different parts of their lives.

Daily, adults experience changes and developments in all sorts of ways. Changes to their health, their work, their friends and family, their homes or their communities will affect them deeply. Because of the responsibilities and demands adult learners experience, their time is usually limited and precious.

## **Adults learn because they want to.**

Sometimes adults join a learning group because they want to learn a particular skill or gain knowledge that will help them in their work at home or in the community. Sometimes they like to be part of a group for social or personal reasons. Each adult may have a different idea about what they hope to achieve in the learning group.

## **Adults want to be treated with respect.**

Many adults will remember a schoolroom in which the teacher controlled the classroom and knew all the answers. They may feel anxious about being tested in front of others or may fear being laughed at. Many are sensitive to criticism. Adults generally do not want to be treated like children or study from children's books. At the same time, they may expect the teacher to behave in a controlling way. They may feel threatened if the teacher asks for their opinion. It can take time for an adult to build confidence as a learner in a new learning environment such as a class or tutoring situation.

## **Adults have vast reservoirs of knowledge and experience.**

Each adult has a unique set of ideas, values, attitudes, needs, and problems. Adults have organized stores of knowledge acquired from past experience. This experience affects the ways in which they learn and comprehend new information. Adults find it much easier to learn something new if it is linked to what they already know and understand.

Sometimes adults have to unlearn what they know already in order to learn something new. Old learning habits and attitudes towards learning may stand in the way of acquiring new knowledge. This can be very difficult. For example, in order to become a strong participant in a learning group, a learner must unlearn habits that she learned at school, where she had to keep quiet and only listen to the teacher.

Because adults bring with them a rich store of history and experience, they are able to contribute useful skills and knowledge to the group. Sometimes adults are not confident about their abilities to learn, and they may say they are “too old.” They do not realize that they know a lot already and that they have much to contribute to the group.

### **Adults develop patterns of learning that work for them.**

Adults have to learn all the time in order to cope with life. Over time they develop unique ways of understanding and remembering new information and skills. They may not be consciously aware of how they do this.

Different adults will learn at different speeds, depending on their past experience and how closely the new knowledge is linked with that they know already. Health factors such as poor eyesight or hearing may also affect how fast an adult can learn something new.

### **Learning brings change.**

We have all learned many things in our lives. We learned to walk, talk, look after ourselves, cross a road, and count money. Some things we learned without thinking, such as our first language. Other things we learn involve much more conscious effort and understanding, such as how to reply to an email.

Learning brings changes:

- It may bring a change in behavior (a person will avoid a dog after it has growled in a threatening manner).
- It may bring a change in skills (a person may learn to drive a car).
- It may bring a change in information (a person may learn a friend’s new address and telephone number).
- It may bring a change in feelings (a person may feel anxious about all dogs after a dog growled in a threatening manner).

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